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THE FORGOTTEN WOMAN

BY JOHN CORBIN

MUCH has been said of late of the economic pressure which is bearing so heavily upon the officer in our Army or Navy, upon the teacher, the university professor, especially the clergyman. The lack of adequate means cramps him as a servant of the community, weakening our institutions of light and leadership. But that is not his chief hardship. The pressure becomes decisive when it touches him in his personal relations as lover, as husband, as father. Our institutions of service and enlightenment have a yoke-fellow in misery, the home. In the personal life of salaried people everywhere—the families of the Middle Class—the millstones are grinding, grinding. Now in an organized institution a decline of morale may be measurably checked. Congress comes to the aid of the service academy, loyal alumni to the aid of the university. But the unorganized institution of the home has no champion and defender. That the Middle Class is forgotten, we cheerfully assume, is its own affair. If any one considers its plight, it is the labor leader, the Guild Socialist, who counsels the “salariat” to unionize and join the proletarian movement—as musicians, actors, and many school teachers have already done. In effect, accordingly, the forgotten man’s home is his own affair.

Or, rather, is it not more particularly the affair of his wife? If she is forgotten, the world we live in is ungallant, certainly—and much more than that. Her cause is public, universal; for she is, or she should be, the mother of the finest and the best of the nation, the hope of all its future. Without her, Army and Navy, school, university and church, are alike vain and futile. In the lack of a worthier, I venture to be her champion. This is an essay in feminism—feminism, at least, of a sort.

The hardship of the middle class woman long antedates the war. During the suffrage campaigning we were often told how,

in the last century and a half, the activities that make her life significant have largely been taken away from her. But the political bearing of the fact is less important than the social. Let us consider this matter once more.

The old individualist era has given way to the era of collective organization—the mill, the factory, the department store. The crafts of the industrial household have been taken out of the home and organized in the world outside on a vast national scale. Women no longer produce; they buy. The home alone is economically unorganized—has become positively disorganized. But that is only the beginning. If middle class women have children, as some of the more valiant still do, they have become less indispensable even as mothers; the organization of modern life takes from them the care of their own flesh and blood the moment it becomes vitally interesting. The trained nurse, the school and the university step in, assuming responsibility. Many a mother of three, of four, of five, finds her days largely empty after she has finished the brief daily task of ordering her household.

Such mothers are found mainly in the upper range of the Middle Class. For the most part, the forgotten woman has few children or none. Actual figures are not at hand, for the census taker also has neglected the middle class woman; but the rough outlines of the situation have long been familiar. It has been said that if the present birthrate continues the descendants of the Fathers who came over in the Mayflower could very soon go back, all in the Mayflower. The statement is less whimsical and exaggerated than Mayflower folk have contended. As to college graduates, we have definite though scattering statistics. The average Harvard man, as Professor Cattell has graphically put it, has “seven-tenths of a son,” the average Vassar woman “one-half of a daughter”—a child and a half and one child respectively being the fruit of the lives of two people. Thus it appears that the line of those who are educable and educated shrinks by almost one half with each generation. Middle class women have become not merely unproductive but unproductive. In one way it is natural that highly educated folk are less fertile, most of the years of their prime being devoted to study and to the long labor of establishing themselves in a profession. But is it

not something more than natural, something quite topsy-turvy, that those who are capable of the fullest moral and intellectual achievement should, by that very fact, have their line extinguished?

In the refusal of middle class women to bear children there is, no doubt, a measure of cultural self indulgence, even of frivolity. There has been, of late years, a great increase of lecture-going, of devotion to music and the drama, of participation in the affairs of the world of society, fashion, travel—in brief, all the phenomena of a rapidly diffusing civilization. These too lead away from the home; no less than industry, culture has gone out from the household, and with much the same result—a tendency to limit the family. It is not without warrant that the moralist inveighs against the decay of the home life of our ancestors, so wholesomely simple and affectional. But there could be no greater mistake than to regard all this as the result of wilful selfishness. Primarily the lifting of the cultural standards of the Middle Class is the result of an instinct sound and salutary—calculated to give it precisely the breadth of outlook and tonic mentality which has hitherto been its greatest lack. Where once the class was mentally lethargic, drab in its mood and shoddy in its taste, it is now intellectually alert and æsthetically discriminating. And it is right to be so. Who is more surely entitled than the brainworker and the mother of brainworkers to a wide spiritual horizon and deep culture? Few things could be more essential to the progress of civilization. Yet the fact remains that thus far the cultural gain of the class has contributed powerfully toward its ultimate extinction.

The basic cause of race suicide in the Middle Class is not frivolity, not selfishness, but a maladjustment between income and function; brain-working folk can no longer afford to have children and raise them to the normal life of their kind. All this is an incident of the Industrial Revolution—a fateful economic development which we are powerless to resist and which as yet, in all likelihood, we do not fully comprehend. But so much we know: the wife who used to be a true helpmeet, producing values daily,—values in both the materials of life and in life itself,—is now, as she herself says bitterly, a parasite. One day's

labor, one salary, and that a salary of diminishing value, pays for all.

This inequity is, however, only in part a thing beyond our control. It is reënforced by our own acts and institutions. Our economic system is based on the assumption, never quite justified and never less so than today, that all citizens are alike parents and householders. The result is to penalize parenthood. The so-called protective tariff is so far from protecting the home that it makes depredations upon the welfare of every member of it. A bachelor is taxed only upon what he himself eats and wears, but a father is taxed upon as many as there are members of his household. Yet we are surprised that an increasing number of men lead single lives, and we search the streets and by ways for the causes of prostitution. If parents educate their children, as middle class parents should, until the age of eighteen, or twenty-two,—even twenty-five for those who study professions,—then they continue to be taxed not only for what the children eat and wear but largely also for what is eaten and worn by their teachers. The more they do for their children, in short,—the greater their service to the State,—the more severely they are penalized.

When a middle class man becomes a father, he gives a mortgage on his life, jeopardizes his best work in the world. The mother faces not only an ordeal of life and death but a strong probability that she and all who are dearest to her will be disclassed—forced down to the world of the manual worker, which is today the world of the alien, slovenly and uncouth. Those who still have a child or two do so, not as an act of happy, normal functioning but as a deed of rare personal heroism. And, confronted by a vanishing birthrate among the well born and well bred, we scold our women because they do not do their duty by the future!

Among the poor, conditions are far otherwise. There are free maternity hospitals, free clinics and dispensaries, free parks and playgrounds, free baths and outings in summer. There are free trade schools by day and by night, free lectures and free music, sometimes free meals in the public schools. On the lower planes of living it is as easy as not to have children. Who pays for all this? The money comes out of municipal taxes, over nine-tenths of which

fall upon real estate, which is to say, upon rent. That is a heavy burden on the offices, shops and homes of the Middle Class. Yet relatively the poor have less need of help in these matters; in their homes the Industrial Revolution has wrought no change that is vital. Women are still economically productive—cooking, keeping house, sewing. Children also earn their keep as soon as they are through grammar school, finding employment which means a sizable pay envelope. Sons and daughters of day laborers, nurtured and educated largely at the expense of the Middle Class, often earn more than their fathers. Still, as in the patriarchal day and the day of household industries, a family is a burden for a few years only; eventually it is an economic asset. However large it is, it tends positively to rise in the social scale. And so, on the lower planes of living, the race still breeds with its age-old fecundity. In a period of about six generations, as Dr. Davenport has shown, while 1,000 Harvard graduates are dwindling to 50, 1,000 Roumanians, at their present birthrate, will increase to 100,000. The slums swarm with the children of the lowly born, the lowly bred—who inherit the future.

The war rendered the malady of the middle class woman doubly acute. We may never know precisely how deep was the devastation wrought by the increasing demands of labor, how crushing the burden of the redoubled cost of living upon fixed incomes. But there have been many straws in the wind. Actually a bureau at Washington gave its mind to the crisis. After the war, certain problems of “the new poor” were discussed in *The Labor Review* and—a highly sardonic circumstance—were discussed with a sympathy which had hitherto been confined to the manual worker.

Do housewives who once enjoyed the services of a cook find domestic labor difficult? They have only to apply the principles which they have long practiced in outdoor sport. “With the same form and spirit we can find as much health and exercise in housework as in a game of tennis or golf. Can’t we?” In dish-washing, as in golf, a matter of primary importance is the stance. Stand easily but solidly upon both feet. “When will women stop wearing their old high-heeled pumps for housework?” Clothing also should be “loose and sensible”, so that, in dish-

washing as in golf, it will come natural to play each stroke through. It is very important to "use the back properly". If doubt arises as to just how to use the back, the newly poor housewife is informed that Cornell University "has a whole bulletin on this important subject". Above all, put the same "rhythm and spirit" into dishwashing that so signally triumphs upon the links. Don't get downhearted. A dishwasher may be down, but she is never out. Presumably, those who feel that way may be permitted to address the dish—a linguistic detail in which the newly poor housewife is already proficient. And, first and last, keep your eye on the dish, also on the knife and spoon—especially on the fork! No woman can develop her full game as a dishwasher without remembering to keep her eye on the fork. Thus, thanks to the guidance, philosophy and friendship of the Department of Labor, Washington, the new poor have only themselves to blame if they do not find the uses of adversity sweet.

There is only one fly in this wealth of amber. Even with all aid from the technique of golf, housework "becomes difficult in the case of a mother with two or more children". If such a one wishes to avoid drudgery and heartbreak she will have to practice an efficiency vastly heightened and intensified. And at that her case is dubious. The technique of motherhood is beyond even the high example of golf. And so it appears that those, who, thanks to exceptional energy and ability, have risen from the handworking into the brainworking stratum, are doomed by the most cheerful philosophy which the Department of Labor commands to the ultimate futility of the one-child family.

Of deeper import is a statement from the New York Commissioner of Charities made in the period following the war. For the first time in the history of his Commission, educated people employed in brain labor brought their children to him, confessing that they were no longer able to feed them and keep them warm. Yet while the world was agog over the professional decay of Army and Navy, of the churches and universities, no voice was raised in behalf of well born women and the traditions of the seemly home.

As Ruskin long ago made clear, children well born and well bred are the basic wealth of any nation. It should scarcely have

needed an art critic to tell the economists that! Of what use are the utmost material gain, the most perfectly devised institutions, if the citizens who inherit them are enfeebled in blood, defective in upbringing? Darwin himself pointed out that the one sure result of our philanthropic democracy is to waste our resources and reduce our stamina; yet, while we follow him in plant and animal biology, even in conceiving of our economic and social systems as an "evolution", we think of the developing life of the race in the dead terms of political institutions and material wealth. The greatest economic waste in the world, it used to be said, is in the unproductive lives of women of the Middle Class. But the economic waste is a poor and trivial thing when compared to the waste of social and vital values—the tradition of the American home, the distinction and the vigor of the American people.

Still we do nothing. Though our leaders in anthropology, in biology, in sociology, are themselves middle class men, they have no programme—have scarcely even stated the problem. The brainworker, I freely admit, is forgotten because he has rather stupidly forgotten himself. I should say the same of his wife if it were not for the suffrage movement, of which the present decade has witnessed the culmination and triumph. In one regard, obviously, our women have not been forgotten, have not forgotten themselves. What is the basis of this historic movement, and how is it related to feminine welfare? There have been many theories of late as to the *primum mobile* of history—some of them no doubt extreme, yet scarcely the less interesting.

The basis of history, Marx declared, is to be found in questions of land and of food supply: "the source of all historic change is economic." There is an element of truth in this idea, yet its application to the feminist movement is not at all clear. The only women who faced any real problem of subsistence, at least before the war, were of the class of unskilled labor, and they were notably indifferent to the vote. They could not see how it would clothe them, feed their children. It is true that Socialists and labor unions declared for woman's suffrage; but the declaration was, so to speak, academic—a yielding to special pressure, or at best an expression of the theory of democratic equality. Neither Unionist nor Socialist ever fought for suffrage as they have

fought for any one of a dozen causes in which working hours and the pay envelope were at stake.

What then was the "basis" of the suffrage movement? It has not been sufficiently regarded, I think, that the women who won the vote were mainly of the Middle Class—well born, well educated, intelligent. Their most prominent allies were of the capitalist class. It was not, in fact, until suffrage became distinctly fashionable that it had any distinct success. We beheld the curious spectacle of a band of gentlewomen, who were lapped in luxury and had the world of enjoyment at their feet, working themselves into a genuinely noble passion over the wrongs of their sex—and finally driving before them our wariest and astutest politicians. Whatever the basis of their wrongs and rights, it was not economic. The one thing which these women were most obviously free from was the pang of bodily need.

Nor have they, as it seems, any definite use for the vote now that they have achieved it. Everywhere we see a still more noteworthy spectacle, also unexplained—millions of women who might wield the supreme political power, dictate their measures to either party, who yet have not the slightest idea of doing so. They vote Republican or vote Democratic quite as helplessly as their men folk. They have raised no issue that is not directly in line with programmes that have long been formed, and in a large measure executed. Neither in its origin nor in its ends does the suffrage movement, at least to the superficial view, appear to have had a material basis, economic or otherwise. It was a thing of the mind and the spirit as few movements have ever been. Now that the struggle is ended, most suffragists admit in their franker moments a sense, not of having gained something, but of having lost it. Even so in 1918 a host of women workers felt that, as one of them expressed it, they had "lost the war".

Of late years we have heard less of the economic basis of history. As Graham Wallas has declared—though like Ruskin he was in a measure anticipated in the eighteenth century by Turgot—the true basis is psychologic. Is the origin of the suffrage movement psychologic? In other words, is it a matter of normal human instincts as they work themselves out in civilized life—what

Turgot called "the hidden principles that contribute to form our mind and character"? The unsatisfied food-hunger of the primitive Hun determined his psychology as a conqueror; but so also did the unsatisfied power-hunger of his modern namesake. Doubtless there is an economic element in all historic changes—a physical need to be satisfied; but historians of Mr. Wallas's persuasion find, and I think with reason, that it becomes powerful only as it works upon character—psyche, the soul. The most direct and powerful factor in historic changes is a primal passion unsatisfied, a thirst of the spirit which is unassuaged.

In the life of the middle class woman today is there any unsatisfied longing? There are ten thousand, certainly, as there always have been in all walks of human life and doubtless always will be. These, however, are not primal but superficial things. Of primal passions thwarted only one suggests itself. Middle class women are childless as no group has ever been which was so large, so intelligent and so morally earnest.

Was the suffrage movement, then, the result of a maternal hunger aching to be satisfied? Listen, good people! I beg and entreat a serious hearing, for I know I shall seem paradoxical, finding the origin of woman's demand for political power in a merely primitive and personal instinct. Let us look at the facts with philosophic calm and detachment.

In the feminine assault upon the dull mass of the world's indifference there was more than a suggestion of primal passion. Few causes have ever been waged more relentlessly. Said the spouse of an early suffragist, with a wry smile, "Woman's spear is in the home—and she uses it! Her spear knows no husband." But outside the home her activities proved far more deadly—even in countries where there was no smashing of plate glass, no fouling of letter boxes with pitch, no cruelly perplexing hunger strikes—as many an American politician can testify who in the face of these incomprehensible, inexorable furies found himself helpless, nonplussed, his whole political future in jeopardy. The well known card index, recording his political past and his moving present as if with the finger of fate, ceaselessly rode his nightmares. The politician at least would agree that the suffragists had all the fury of the tigress bereft of her cubs.

There is, however, a difference. The tigress knows what it is she has lost. The middle class woman resents it bitterly if anyone relates her "cause" to her childlessness, making it merely an effect. Here is the deliberate statement of a well-known leader: "Fundamental problems such as race suicide, celibacy, eugenics, etc., are beside the suffrage question. If anyone hopes to solve them through suffrage he is on the wrong path. No suffragist, however uninformed, would hold such premises." It is as if a man should say that his right to vote has no possible relation to the tariff and taxation, to war and peace, to the League of Nations. The tigress knows what she has lost; but in the woman there is no bridge between the subconscious longing and the void in her conscious life. Nature prompts her, tortures her, martyrizs her with the insistent instinct of motherhood; yet her resultant activities—in society and self culture, in charity, in politics—have only the remotest relation to her true cause. The case is psychologic, but abnormally so.

Her childlessness, to be sure, is not really her fault. It is the result of social and economic conditions which have worked through generations and which are beyond any individual control. She is the victim of a world malady. Why, in the name of all income and outgo, should she not be childless? Marriage makes her a parasite upon her struggling man: the least she can do is to see to it that children do not swarm upon him. But her subconscious mind does not realize this, any more than the subconscious mind of Mr. Jones or Mr. Smith knows that the name was wished upon him by an unjustly ironic, a capricious fate; it is enough—too much!—that he *is* Smith. It may even be doubted whether the conscious minds of many feminist women are well grounded in the sociology of race suicide. They only know that, in their own individual cases, nature prompted and they willed otherwise. Love came and marriage—but then the primordial forces were suppressed. To speak of their childlessness is to touch the rawest spot in their being, which every instinct, conscious and subconscious, tells them to hide from all the world.

Again, do not misconceive me! The suffrage cause had many phases, several of them quite unconnected psychologically with

this child-complex. Thus the woman who inherits the talents of the old mistresses of an industrial household—the talent of management, of planning and directing the creation of new commodity values—very naturally breaks loose from the functionless home of today and finds scope for her productive ability in a profession or in the market place. She is often the truer woman—not her sister who sits idle and discontented in the lap of barren ease—and she was probably the most powerful if the least showy element in the suffrage movement. But of the two womanly instincts, productive and reproductive, only the mother instinct is primal, impassioned; only that tortures a true woman, martyrizs her, when it is denied.

Examples of the feminine psychology misdirected abound in the modern world. No fallen sister is too vile to enlist its most passionate championship, its fiercest energies. Sensitive, high-minded women fairly haunted the Night Court until it was abolished. But from the cause of the well born child they turned coldly away, stone deaf and purblind. In San Francisco some years ago a man was charged with assault on a woman of the streets and the judge put his bail so low that he jumped it. It was a case of men of a kind standing together. In California woman's "spear" had just been taken out of the home and it was brightly barbed with a modern improvement known as the recall. The women went after that judge, and they *got* him. Meantime in the city of Berkeley there was a referendum on the question of issuing bonds for playgrounds sorely needed by the children. Only a minority of women voted and so the playgrounds were lost. The referendum was just as bright and shiny as the recall, and the welfare of children was at stake, children of their own kind and breeding. But the issue was so abhorrent to the psychology of the majority of woman voters that no earthly power could make them aware of its existence.

From the Neolithic Age, which first saw household industries, to the era of the Industrial Revolution, women have lived untold generations of happy, normal functioning. Of late, within a single century, the whole basis of the life of the middle class woman has shifted from beneath her. If today, living in barren households and with a strange, new outer world of opportunity

beckoning, our women are restless, eager, rebellious—dallying with every old vice and new folly—surely, nature knows why. And steadily, irresistibly, nature is teaching them—teaching even that stupidest of consorts, the brainworking man. They are voters now—no longer obliged to argue, cajole, threaten with the votes of others. What their hearts conceive their own hands can accomplish.

And they have a cause that eventually no true man can fail to understand. The brawniest male still bears in his pectoral muscles a reminder of the time when his far grandsires of the arboreal days enjoyed a measure of sex equality which the progress of specialization has denied him. There is still an instinct in his heart telling him that when people are married the first need of their love is children.

Was there ever room in the feminist movement for sex antagonism? Was it not a man who first urged it upon the world that women should be voters? It was men who first attacked, and have so largely reformed, the old, unjust laws as to women's property. It was men who swept away the strongholds of shoddy fabrics and poisoned foods; who devised the benefit for widowed and deserted mothers; who are today strong allies in the effort to prevent the marriage of young girls to diseased and degenerate males. Men are slow and blundering, no doubt; but they are not tyrants, not usurpers. For true men have always known that the cause of women is also their cause, being the cause of the nation and of civilization.

Through all the unrecorded æons of biology, our ancestors have had children and reared them—without one break in the age-old line. Now for the first time women well born and well bred are bereft of labor, bereft of their privilege as mothers of the world to come. When the storm rages, there is somewhere a void to be filled. All our talk of the tyranny of men, of the equality of the sexes, is only the cry of the wind in the trees, its howling among the ledges that oppose it. The secret of the storm is in the void beyond. Listen intently and you will hear the true voice of our women: "Let us too suffer and create. Give us back our labor; give us back our children!"

JOHN CORBIN.